DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 122 321 CS 501 352

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TITLE Teaching Conflict Resolution Simulations.
PUB DATE 76
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Communication Association (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, March 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage
DESCRIPTORS *Communication Skills; *Conflict Resolution; Group Relations; Human Relations; Interaction; Secondary Education; *Simulation; *Student Participation; Teaching Methods; *Teaching Models
IDENTIFIERS *Speech Communication

ABSTRACT

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TEACHING CONFLICT RESOLUTION SIMULATIONS

by

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Abstract

The use of simulation in teaching conflict can be an effective way to promote student involvement. The role of the classroom teacher is to deal with actual student conflict while facilitating the development of communication skills which will aid in the resolution of conflict. This paper suggests one classroom model which utilizes a combination of instruments, exercises and simulations in a three stage approach to the study of conflict. The first phase involves developing student awareness of various conflict management styles; the second involves building trust in the group and the third phase simulates conflict.

Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the Eastern Communication Association Philadelphia, March, 1976.

CS 501 352

The use of simulation techniques in teaching conflict is an outgrowth of the recent emphasis on experiential learning. When accompanied by adequate theoretical preparation and follow up discussion, simulations can be very useful in developing an awareness of the nature of conflict, one's own behavior and a variety of potential behavioral approaches to the resolution of conflict. First of all, simulations provide an opportunity for the student to practice particular skills in a relatively safe environment. Though by their very nature, simulations distort reality, they nevertheless may serve to focus on certain elements of real conflicts and when managed effectively, simulations increase student involvement, add "fun" to learning and provide the opportunity for systematic observation of one's own and others' behavior.

In defining conflict, I refer to Lewis Coser who asserts that conflicts involve " a struggle over values and claims to scarce status, power and resources in which the aims of the opponents are to neutralize, injure or eliminate their rivals." He further distinguishes between "realistic" and "unrealistic" conflicts--an important consideration when teaching about or analysing adolescent conflict in particular. "Realistic" conflict arises from frustrations over specific demands with estimates of potential gains and losses, whereas, "unrealistic" conflict is notisque oriented and involves tension release on the part of at least one participant.[1] Recently, there has been growing recognition that communication theory and conflict theory are related; for parties to be in conflict they must also be in communication.[2] More specifically, in Perspectives on Communication and Social Conflict, Simons suggests that speech communications may add considerable knowledge to the study of conflict through careful analysis of the message patterns in conflict interactions.[3]

What this suggests to the speechcommunication teacher is that conflict must be understood as a natural and potentially productive force in human interaction. Conflict can and should be approached in the classroom, with every effort being made to avoid punitive measures in dealing with existing conflicts and with attention being given to improving conflict resolution skills. To suggest two of many theoretical constructs, I refer the reader to Anatol Rapoport and Muzafer Sherif.[4]

Rapoport sees three types of conflict: fights, games and debates. The objective of fights is to destroy or get rid of the opponent, of games to outwit the opponent and of debates to convert or convince the opponent. He suggests that conflict can best be managed in the form of debate and argues that converting fights and games to debates is the way most likely to nurture conflict resolution. Rapoport suggests three steps to conducting conflict as a debate:

1) Assurance of understanding--state the opponents' case in a way acceptable to them.
2) Recognition of validity--state what portions of the opponents' beliefs you can accept so as to stress areas of agreement.
3) Assumption of similarity--get your opponents to assume you are like them by treating them as if they were like you.

Sherif, in his classic study of preadolescent boys now identified as "The Rober's Cave Experiment" created intergroup conflict and then developed a plan for reducing tension and increasing cooperation. He proposes the development of "superordinate goals" as one effective way to resolve conflict. These are goals which are mutually compelling and desirable and which can only be attained through mutual cooperation and recognition of interdependence. The approach is essentially task oriented and presents a major problem in identifying such goals outside a controlled environment.

Whichever theoretical model or models the teacher chooses to work from, some important considerations arise in the teaching of conflict. Most students have already learned that conflict is inherently evil, to be avoided and, certainly not to be expressed openly as a natural part of learning and growth. Furthermore, if the teacher is to deal with conflict at all, the teacher must be aware of the factors indigenous to the classroom which are likely to spark both realistic and unrealistic conflict.[5] That is to say, the teacher must deal not only with simulated conflict, but with the real and more complex conflicts experienced by the students. The teacher must take care not to present conflict resolution skills as a panacea and must not hesitate to explain that some conflicts (especially those involving deeply rooted, sometimes contradictory feelings of individual students) are best managed by avoiding them altogether. In my judgment, the teaching of conflict resolution through communication should ideally be a part of a more detailed course in interpersonal effectiveness. When this is not the case, some minimal instruction in basic skills should precede the direct treatment of conflict. Particular attention should be given to developing a supportive and accepting classroom atmosphere where conflicts can be openly aired without fear of reprisal.

A THREE PHASE APPROACH TO TEACHING CONFLICT

I would like to suggest a three step approach to teaching conflict using a combination of instrumentation, exercises and simulations. This approach had grown out of my own experience with high school seniors and seems to be one effective way of implementing some of the concepts outlined above. The three phases are:

1) Measuring of Student Attitude and Approaches to Conflict
2) Legitimizing the Expression of Conflict Through Self Disclosure and Trust Building
3) Simulating Conflict

PHASE 1: Measurement

Several instruments are available in aiding students development of self awareness and, when used in conjunction with classroom exercise, they provide a solid basis for further exploration. The general objectives of this phase are to aid students in identifying their own approaches to conflict and to familiarize students with a variety of other approaches to conflict.

TELEOMETRICS International (P.O. Drawer 1850, Conroe, Texas 77301) has a particularly useful instrument developed by Jay Hall, the Conflict Management Survey. The survey was developed for use in industrial and managerial training programs but can be adapted for student use. The instrument measures conflict in terms of concern for task and concern for people--utilizing the standard two dimensional Blake and Mouton managerial grid. The questions focus on four levels of conflict--intrapersonal, interpersonal, intragroup and intergroup. The survey delineates five possible styles to conflict management--Problem Solving, Compromising, Yield/Lose, Win/Lose, and Lose/Leave. The instrument's chief asset is that it defines the respondent's preferred style as well as preferred ranking of back-up styles.

A second useful questionnaire, developed by Clyde Morris, measures each student's degree of dogmatism, trust in others and attitudes towards communication and conflict. (Appendix K, in "Communication and Conflict Resolution: A Prototype Course for Undergradutes" ED 050 090). In comparison with the Conflict Management Survey, the Morris questionnaire takes less time to complete (approximately 15 min. as compared to 45 min. or longer) and lends itself readily to discussion purposes.

I have found two exercises from the Pfeiffer and Jones series especially helpful in focusing student attention on specific conflict situations and in identifying particular strategies under the various general headings of Avoidance, Defusion and Confrontation. Conflict Fantasy: A Self Examination (Pfeiffer and Jones, 1974 Annual Handbook, pp. 22-23) requires that the instructor create a fantasy situation for students where each must meet the person with whom he or she is most in conflict at the present moment. The teacher allows students to develop the fantasy in their minds and then asks that each decide what alternatives are available, select one of them, imagine what might happen and then evaluate the outcome. This is a difficult exercise to use and requires that the teacher be a gifted story teller and that the students have vivid imaginations. If these conditions are met however, the exercise encourages valuable discussion of several strategies.

As an alternative to Conflict Fantasy, I would suggest Frustrations and Tensions (Pfeiffer and Jones, 1972 Annual Handbook, pp. 5-10). This exercise confronts each student with several frustrating situations through the use of cartoons. The students are asked to fill in the dialogue and then discuss the various options suggested by members of the groups. In small groups of 6-10, this exercise can lead to discussion of probable effects of the responses made and to generalizations about effective responses to tense interpersonal situations.

PHASE 2: Legitimizing the Expression of Conflict Through Self-Disclosure and Trust Building

This is a particularly difficult part of the program to develop successfully and the effectiveness of Phase 3 hinges on the gourp cohesion built here. The general objectives are: to determine the student's present level of trust in interpersonal relationships, to provide an objective basis for distinguishing thoughts from feelings and to increase the level of trust in the class group. In measuring the student's present level of trust, I have found David Johnson's Friendship Relations Survey (Reaching Out, pp. 20-25) a very useful instrument. The survey presents 20 hypothetical situations involving relationships with friends and asks respondents to indicate which of two responses is most characteristic of them. The survey provides an operational definition of "trust" measured in terms of receptivity to feedback and willingness to self disclose. The Friendship Relations Survey may be used again at the end of Phases 2 and 3 to test for increases in the trust level of class members.

Think-Feel: A Verbal Progression (Pfeiffer and Jones, Structured Experiences, Vol. III, pp. 70-71) is a useful exercise in aiding students link thoughts to observable behavior and to express ownership of feelings. Four rounds, each requiring the students to complete a sentence, are designed to illustrate how thoughts develop from observations of behavior and how feelings are directly connected to environmental conditions. In small groups, each student must first complete the statement "Now I see . . ." (focusing on the nonverbal behavior of others in the group), followed by "Now I think . . .," "Now I feel . . ." (to be

completed by an adjective) and finally the statement "Now I think you feel . . ." (a description of the feelings of another gourp member). Whether this exercise is used or not it is essential that students learn to distinquish feeling statements from others referring to directly observable behavior. This provides the basis for both an increase in the willingness to self disclose and for constructive interpersonal confrontation.

One exercise which demonstrates the usefulness of self-disclosure and its value in building trust in groups is the Intimacy Program (Pfeiffer and Jones, Structured Experiences, Vol. III, pp. 89-92). Students are given a paper with fifty questions ranging from very non-threatening requests through several very personal, intimate questions (e.g. "What is your favorite hobby," "Do you consider yourself liberal or conservative?""What is the most serious lie you ever told?," "Do you enjoy directing or manipulating people?"). I begin by having students work in pairs and then gradually combine groups until the whole class is reassembled. The rules are that each student may ask any member of his group any question on the list provided he would be willing to answer it himself. Everyone then has the right to refuse to answer any question put to him provided it is one he has not yet asked another. I have had high success with this exercise and most students report considerable satisfaction with both the quantity and quality of new information gained.

In conjunction with the Intimacy Program, I use Expressing Anger: A Self Disclosure Exercise (Pfeiffer and Jones, Structured Experiences, Vol. IV, pp. 104-105) to clarify several styles of expressing anger in groups and to estimate the effects of anger on groups. Each student is asked to complete in writing, his responses to four statements: 1) "I feel angry when others . . .", 2) "I feel that my anger is . . .," 3) "When others express anger toward me, I feel . ." 4) "I feel that the anger of others is . . ." Sharing of responses usually leads to identification of some of the behaviors which provoke anger and to an increased willingness to express anger in the group.

PHASE 3: Simulating Conflict

In attempting to simulate conflict it seems wise to move from fairly non-threatening simulations intended to identify sources of conflict (refer to Coser) within groups to those which are more difficult in that they involve people in one to one confrontations. The general objectives of using simulated conflict were stated on page 1. Some teachers may wish to emphasize broad forms of social and international conflict. David W. Zukerman and Robert E. Horn[6] have compiled an extensive catalog of simulations with descriptions, prices and authors. Many of these seem particularly appropriate in teaching conflict: Campus Crisis, Confrontation, Generation Gap, and Star Power, to mention a few. The simulations I have used in my teaching are best suited to an analysis of interpersonal and small group conflict.

To demonstrate intragroup cooperation in terms of individual inclinations towards giving and receiving, the Coin Game (Karen Krupar, Communications Games: Participant's Manual, p. 113) is an effective tool. Each student is asked to note important personality characteristics and contributions of members of his own family, including himself. The teacher asks each student to bring one dollar in change to the next meeting. Once assembled, the students should be broken into

groups of 6-10, instructed to form a circle, to place their change in front of them and to give as much or as little as they choose to any member of the group. After five minutes, the groups are asked to discuss what happened and why and to relate the experience to individuals' behavior outside the group. The groups are asked to return the change, spend five minutes taking change from other members and then to discuss the whole experience. The game illustrates some possible sources of frustration in groups and points out how individual behaviors are related to both cooperation and conflict. The Coin Game is best followed-up with a second Krupar exercise, the Power Game (pp. 113-114). The two are similar but the Power Game connects possession of money to power and is useful in exploring individual responses to authority and the ways certain people persuade others to entrust them with power.

To investigate the relationship between conflict, trust and distrust, the use of Prisoner's Dilemma, or any of its several variations ("Win As Much As You Can," Pfeiffer and Jones, Structured Experiences, Vol. II, pp. 62-67) is particularly helpful. Prisoner's Dilemma is a 2" game which involves two players (or two teams), each with two choices of action. The outcome of the game, the "pay-off" to each player depends on their joint choices. The instructor can change aspects of the situation (such as the pay-offs, the number of plays, the characteristics of the players, instructions to the players and the conditions under which the game is played) in order to show what effects these variations have on the players' choices. Assuming most are familiar with Prisoner's Dilemma, suffice it to say that the game provides an experiential basis for understanding conflict and can be adapted to simulate several models of conflict resolution, including Rapoport's and Sherif's.

In my work with high schoolers, I have relied heavily on developing the ability to give and receive adverse feedback as a key tool in interpersonal conflict resolution. Once a supportive atmosphere has been established, I would recommend the use of Leveling (Pfeiffer and Jones, Structured Experiences, Vol. I, pp. 79-81). This exercise should be used with great caution and students should be instructed to refer to directly observable behavior in making their comments. Each student is asked to write some negative feedback for each member of the group, including himself and the teacher. The comments can be written on separate pieces of paper for each member of the group and left unsigned. All comments are collected and sorted for each participant. In turn, students (and the teacher) is asked to participate in the negative feedback they will receive. Then the comments are read and each person is given the opportunity to compare the anticipated comments with the actual feedback. Although, initially feedback is best given anonomously, subsequent use of this exercise may utilize signed comments or verbal feedback. The instructor may wish to assign definite parameters to the type of feedback given to reduce the level of anxiety many students will experience. (e.g., The teacher may require feedback dealing with only in-class behavior, or that comments attend only to behavior occuring in the last two days, etc.)

Ronald Burke found that confrontation problem solving (as opposed to withdrawing, smoothing, compromising or forcing) was the most effective means to conflict resolution, but also the most difficult to achieve.[7] This difficulty is enchanced when students are accustomed to believing that "fighting" is immature and useless. For precisely this reason, however, I feel it is important to simulate actual interpersonal conflicts and to allow students time to practice

and to implore ways to improve their skills at constructive confrontation. Role-playing, when teacher and students can overcome some of their reluctance to perform, is a particularly simple and important way to simulate intersersonal conflict. Clyde Morris, (in the document cited earlier) provides several role-plays appropriate in an undergraduate setting. I have found David Johnson's guidelines for confrontation (Reaching Out, pp. 159-161) to be very understandable for most high school students I've worked with. In addition to calling on the use of basic interpersonal skills (owning feelings, descriptive statements, relationships statements, empathic listening, etc.), Johnson's guidelines suggest that attention be given to the ability of the person being confronted to act upon the confrontation and to the confronter's willingness to decrease his involvement with the person being confronted. Johnson suggests that practice confrontations be done in triads with one person assigned as an observer. Like Morris, Johnson provides several easily adaptable role-plays (e.g. 1) confront a person who laughs at other people's problems. 2) confront a person who is too "nice" to be real, etc.) which can be followed-up by students confronting other members of the class with real problems. Personally, I am convinced that the experience afforded by role-playing confrontations is essential in nurturing student understanding of interpersonal conflict resolution and I expect to spend several classes each semester using this technique.

Exercises, games and simulations are by no means sufficient in the teaching of conflict and conflict resolution. They are useful in adding a practical dimension to a variety of theoretical constructs. The application of interpersonal skills in the resolution of conflict is an area where speech communication can make significant contributions to the abundant research already compiled by several other disciplines. The responsibility of the speech communication teacher in this area is broad and complicated and most certainly involves dedicated academic preparation and sensitivity to the problems of conflict already existing in the classroom setting.

Footnotes

[1]Lewis Coser, The Function of Social Conflict (New York: Free Press, 1956), pp. 8, 41, 49.

[2]See Herbert W. Simons, "Persuasion in Social Conflicts: A Critique of Prevailing Conceptions and a Framework for Future Research," Speech Monographs 39 (1972): 227-247; Special "Communication and Conflict" issue of SM 41 (1974); Fred E. Jandt, ed., Conflict Resolution Through Communication, (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1973) and Gerald R. Miller and Herbert W. Simons, eds., Perspectives on Communication in Social Conflict, (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1974).

[3]P. 10.

[4]See A. Rapoport, Fights, Games and Debates (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1960) and M. Sherif, O.J. Harvey, B.J. White, W.E. Hood, and C.W. Sherif, Intergroup Conflict and Cooperation: The Robber's Cave Experiment, (Norman, Oklahoma Press Exchange, 1961).

[5]Allan D. Frank, "Conflict in the Classroom," In Fred E. Jandt, ed., Conflict Resolution Through Communication, (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1973).

[6]See The Guide to Simulations/Games for Education and Training, (Lexington: Mass.: Information Resources, Inc., 1973).

[7]See "Methods of Resolving Interpersonal Conflict," Personnel Administration, 1969, pp. 48-55.

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